Decarbonizing Research in our Universities

Policy Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

As part of our society, culture, and our economy, our Universities (or, Higher Education Institutions) should aim towards net-zero emissions. It follows, then, that as a central part of university operations and processes, research itself should also aim towards net-zero emissions. But how can this be done?

On the 18th and 25th of November 2022, environmental humanities PhD students, Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha and Ashley Cahillane, organised hybrid interdisciplinary workshops on the topic of Decarbonizing Research Methods. The workshops were held in the University of Galway and hosted by the Moore Institute for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Insight SFI Research Centre for Data Analytics, and the Irish Humanities Alliance.

The workshop included participation from approximately 40 researchers from all disciplines across universities in Ireland and further afield (Canada, Germany, North America and the United Kingdom). Participants had the opportunity to discuss the carbon management of their own research methodologies and advance ideas about how the research undertaken in their institutions could be decarbonized. The following policy recommendations arose from our discussions.

Who is this document for?

This document is primarily directed towards policy- and decision-makers in the University of Galway. It could also be used as a tool by interested researchers to lobby their own institutions or to develop their own set of decarbonizing principles. This is also a living document and is subject to change and revision based on new information and policy developments.

Acknowledgements

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The University of Galway (hereafter referred to as 'the University') should have a fully-resourced Sustainability Office.** Full-time staff members of this body would include: the Director of Sustainability, the Community and University Sustainability Officer, the Climate Officer, and the Sustainability Data Analyst. For more detail on these roles, please refer to the University of Galway Sustainability Terms of Reference.

- **Through this Sustainability Office or equivalent body, the University should provide templates, guidelines, resources, and support to researchers from all disciplines who wish to incorporate sustainability into research funding applications and project design.** This could be done in collaboration with the Research Office. As noted in the University of Galway Sustainability Terms of Reference: '[t]he Sustainability office aims to equip, empower and engage the campus community to co-create tomorrow's sustainable campus'.

- Funding schemes shape the direction of research. **Internal University research schemes (such as the Hardiman PhD Scholarships in the University of Galway) should include in their application processes a question relating to the management of the environmental impact of research.** At the least, funding calls should invite researchers to consider the environmental impact of their research.

- **The University should lobby external funding bodies (e.g. the Irish Research Council and Science Foundation Ireland) to include in their application processes a question relating to the management of the environmental impact of research and/or invite researchers to consider the environmental impact of their research.** The University should support funding calls that are conscious of lowering the energy impact of research activities, where possible.

- **The University should recognise the value of a truly interdisciplinary approach to decarbonizing research.** This involves recognising the differing contexts, challenges, and perspectives that come with decarbonization in different disciplines.

- **The University should incentivise all departments and research institutes to gain relevant sustainability certifications, such as the My Green Laboratory certification for science-based research.** Humanities disciplines, for example, may seek certification programs for archives or libraries which reflect sustainability/decarbonizing achievements within their own contexts.

- **The principles of equity must inform energy transitions for researchers.** Tenured, permanent, or senior researchers are likely in a better position to decarbonize (i.e. choose slower travel options, opt for online networking, or experiment with different research methods/equipment). As such, these senior researchers should be at the forefront of decarbonization agendas.

- **Relatedly, student, precarious, and Early Career Researchers often have less power to limit the environmental impact of their work.** As these researchers would have higher needs for networking as they begin to establish their careers they, for example, should have more scope for air travel than more established researchers.

- **Research is conducted in built environments.** Sustainability must be incorporated fully into these physical environments (e.g. through water efficiency, waste reduction and separation, automatic lighting, temperature regulation, signage).

- The University should decarbonize research as a matter of priority, out of solidarity with **universities and scholars in the Global South who are already experiencing the disastrous effects of climate breakdown.**

- **Universities in the Global South are often in a more tenuous financial position in terms of decarbonizing research.** Thus, Universities from the Global North should also take every opportunity to support scholars in the Global South to decarbonize their research and mitigate against climate change (e.g. providing videoconferencing and financing slower travel options for students from these contexts).

- **Finally, all researchers should feel empowered to raise concerns and ideas surrounding decarbonizing research.** More frequent, open, and non-judgemental conversations around this topic should occur in staff and research meetings and discussion forums. It should be acknowledged that decarbonizing research demands huge transformations in current work mentalities and practices, and therefore it should be an ongoing, collective, and democratic discussion.

The authors

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Ashley Cahillane is a PhD student in English in University of Galway. Her research is funded by a Government of Irelanc Postgraduate Scholarship and it explores twenty-first-century novels which address human-induced climate change and ecological crisis through the lens of water scarcity.

Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha

Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha is a PhD student in the University of Galway, in Roinn na Gaeilge and Ionad an Léinn Éireannaigh.   Her thesis aims to bring ecocritical theory to bear on readings of modern Irish-language poetry.

Ashley Cahillane and Laoighseach Ní Choistealbha are the authors of this document, yet it is important to acknowledge that this document is founded upon the key ideas which came up during the workshop discussions, and upon already-existing University of Galway policy documents, such as the Sustainability Terms of Reference. We include some directions to further reading and relevant websites below.

Sustainability Terms of Reference

Sustainability Strategy 2021-2025

Student Sustainability Toolkit

Sustainable Event Checklist

The Little Book of Green Nudges

Carbon Footprint of an Email

All of the above documents are freely available to download from the University of Galway Sustainability webpage: https://nuigalway.ie/sustainability/

My Green Labs: https://irishgreenlabs.org

Low-Carbon Research Methods: lowcarbonmethods.com